

VOICES

Antonio Porchia

translated by W. S. Merwin



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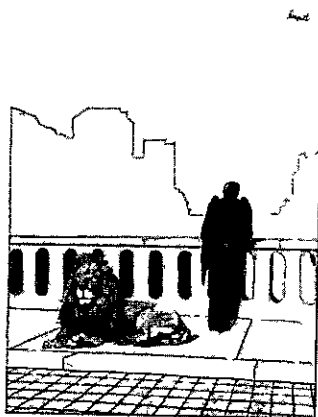
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*"I KNOW WHAT I HAVE GIVEN YOU.
I DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE
RECEIVED": A NOTE ON ANTONIO PORCHIA*

The first collection of Porchia's *Voices* appeared in Buenos Aires, in a private edition, in 1943, and attracted little attention. A copy was sent by the author to the French critic Roger Caillois, who was moved to translate a selection of the aphorisms and publish them, with an introduction, in 1949. The somewhat patronizing tone in which Caillois presented his discovery did not conceal a sense of having been given a rare and original work, and the aphorisms themselves, in his versions, found at the time a number of admirers in the French literary world.

Caillois, wanting to find out what sort of man had written and sent this surprising volume, had looked into the matter and "found myself in the presence of a man somewhere in his fifties, respectably—though neither

marks their kinship, not with theology but with poetry.

And yet the reality of the self, except as suffering, is not an unquestionable certainty. "My final belief is suffering. And I begin to believe that I do not suffer." In any event, the self is less real than that which is greater than it, on which it depends. "We see by means of something which illumines us, which we do not see." The fidelity of Porchia's vision, and its personal embodiment in language, is too sharp, and frequently too desperate, however, to be tempted to homiletics. On the contrary, the distillate of suffering in some of the entries is pure and profound irony—an irony not of defense but of acceptance. "Every toy has to break." "When I throw away what I don't want, it will fall within reach." It is finally the acceptance, with its irony, that underlies the suffering and the vision and relates them to each other in a way that suggests that the relation may be the privilege of man's existence. "Man goes nowhere. Everything comes to man, like tomorrow."

—W. S. MERWIN

Situated in some nebulous distance I do what I do
so that the universal balance of which I am a part may
remain a balance.

He who has seen everything empty itself is close to
knowing what everything is filled with.

Before I travelled my road I was my road.

I found the whole of my first world in my meager bread.

My father, when he went, made my childhood a gift of half a century.

Infancy is what is eternal, and the rest, all the rest, is brevity, extreme brevity.

Without this ridiculous vanity that takes the form of self-display, and is part of everything and everyone, we would see nothing, and nothing would exist.

Truth has very few friends and those few are suicides.

Treat me as you should treat me, not as I should be treated.

Man goes nowhere. Everything comes to men, like the morning.

He who holds me by a thread is not strong; the thread is strong.

A little candor never leaves me. It is what protects me.

A door opens to me. I go in and am faced with a hundred closed doors.

aphorisms have close affinities with sentences from Taoist and Buddhist scriptures; others suggest, among the moderns, not only Kafka but Lichtenberg, or—to someone whose language is English—Blake. Caillois' determining, to his own satisfaction, that Porchia was unfamiliar with such possible mentors is interesting, surprising, and in the end remains for the most part a matter of curiosity rather than a contribution to an assessment of the values and originality of Porchia's *Voices*. For the authority which the entries invoke, both in their matter and in their tone, is not that of tradition or antecedents, but that of particular, individual experience. Whatever system may be glimpsed binding the whole together is not fashioned from any logic except that of one man's cast of existence. It is this which makes the work as a whole, and some of the separate sentences, elusive, but it is this which gives them their unmistakable pure immediacy—their quality of voice.

At the same time, the entries and the work as a whole assume and evoke the existence of an absolute, of the knowledge of it which is truth, and of the immense desirability of such knowledge. With no doctrinal allegiances, nor any attempt at dogmatic system, Porchia's utterances are obviously, in this sense, a spiritual, quite as much as a literary, testament. And the center to which they bear witness, as well as the matrix of their form, is the private ordeal and awe of individual existence, the reality that is glimpsed through time and circumstance, as a consequence of feeling and suffering. It is this ground of personal revelation and its logic, in the sentences, that

studiously nor elegantly—dressed; a potter or carpenter by trade, I forget which, and self-employed, what is more; at once simple and shy, and altogether such that I assured myself, simply as a formality, first by means of certain subterfuges, and then quite openly, that he had never in his life heard of Lao-Tzu or Kafka.” (By whom Caillois had suspected his unknown author to be influenced.)

Judging by Caillois’ observations, the remarkable content of the *Voices* is in a peculiarly pure sense the product of Porchia’s own non-literary experience. Of this, or of its circumstances, little is publically known beyond a few facts so bare that they would fit on any tombstone. Antonio Porchia was born in Italy in 1886, lived in Argentina from 1911, and died in 1968. *Voices* represents the whole of his writing—some six hundred entries in all. There have been several editions since the first one. The most recent (and in Porchia’s judgment the most complete, though it does not include some from the first collection) was published in 1966, and it is from this edition that the present selection has been made. Some of the entries, Porchia has stated, evolved over the course of years; some he has deleted in favor of later ones which, in his opinion, convey the same sense better. But the aphorisms themselves are not, in his view, compositions of his own so much as emanations which he has heard and set down.

It is easy to see why Caillios might have imagined that Porchia owed something to certain Eastern texts, and perhaps to some moderns such as Kafka. A few of the

My poverty is not complete: it lacks me.

If you do not raise your eyes you will think that you are the highest point.

Out of a hundred years a few minutes were made that stayed with me, not a hundred years.

One lives in the hope of becoming a memory.

I have scarcely touched the clay and I am made of it.

I believe that the soul consists of its sufferings.
For the soul that cures its sufferings dies.

Man talks about everything, and he talks about everything as though the understanding of everything were all inside him.

Nothing that is complete breathes.

A great deal that I no longer continue, within myself, continues there on its own.

Yes, they are mistaken, because they do not know.
And if they knew . . . Nothing. They would not even be mistaken.

Everything is like the rivers: the work of the slopes.

When I am asleep I dream what I dream when I am awake. It's a continuous dream.



The summits guide, but among summits.

They have stopped deceiving you, not loving you.
And it seems to you that they have stopped loving you.

It is when I assent to nothing that I assent to all.

Man, when he is merely what he seems to be, is
almost nothing.

You will find the distance that separates you from
them, by joining them.

A hundred men together are the hundredth part of a man.

When the superficial wearies me, it wearies me so much that I need an abyss in order to rest.

Not everyone does evil, but everyone stands accused.

What we pay for with our lives never costs too much.

I will help you to approach if you approach, and to keep away if you keep away.

He who does not fill his world with phantoms remains alone.

Sometimes I find that misery is so vast that I am afraid of needling it.

You think you are killing me. I think you are committing suicide.

The grieving for everyone and about everything has grown and become a grieving for myself, to myself. And it is still growing.

The far away, the very far, the farthest, I have
found only in my own blood.

The mysterious brings peace to my eyes, not
blindness.

When your suffering is a little greater than my
suffering I feel that I am a little cruel.

He who tells the truth says almost nothing.

Mud, when it leaves the mud, stops being mud.

For a thousand years I have been asking myself,
“What will I do now?” And still I need not answer.

Nothing is not only nothing. It is also our prison.

When I come upon some idea that is not of this
world, I feel as though this world had grown wider.

My heaviness comes from the heights.

The earth has what you raise from the earth. It
has nothing more.

Only the wound speaks its own word.

A new pain enters and the old pains of the household receive it with their silence, not with their death.

Yes, I will try to be. Because I believe that not being is arrogant.

That in man which cannot be domesticated is not his evil but his goodness.

Day cannot mock him who does not mock the night.

No, I will not go in. Because if I go in there is no one.

Nothing—it is said of this, of that, of almost everything. Only it is never said of nothing.

I love for the sake of what I loved, and what I loved I would not go back to loving.

When I believe that the stone is stone and the cloud cloud, I am in a state of unconsciousness.

The flower that you hold in your hands was born today and already it is as old as you are.

Sometimes I think that everything I see does not exist. Because everything I see is what I saw. And everything that I saw does not exist.

Chimeras come singly and leave accompanied.



There are sufferings that have lost their memory
and do not remember why they are suffering.

Man, when he does not grieve, hardly exists.

They will say that you are on the wrong road, if
it is your own.

A wing is neither heaven nor earth.

We have a world for each one, but we do not have
a world for all.

Pain unsettles me when it is weak; when it is strong it calms me.

Nothing ends without breaking, because everything is endless.

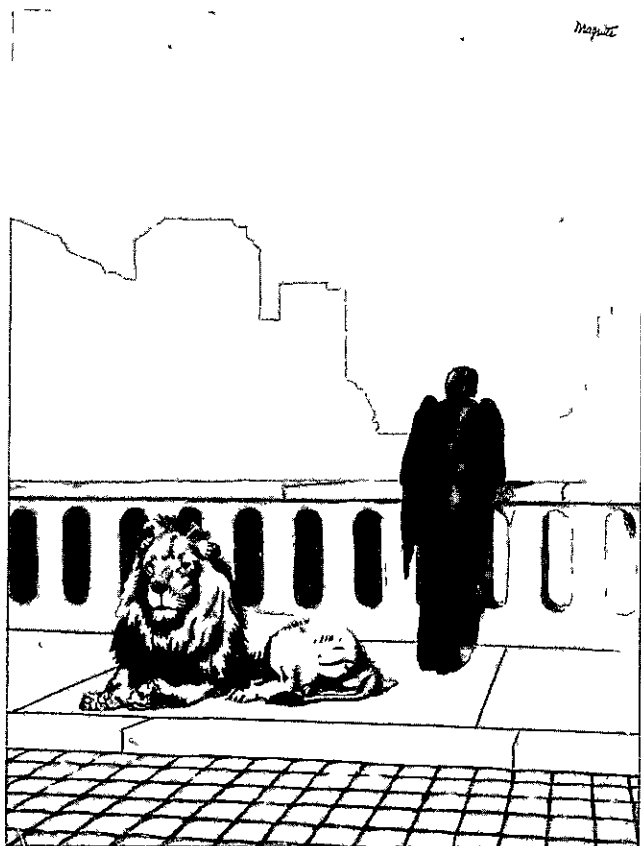
I have come one step away from everything. And here I stay, far from everything, one step away.

All the suns labor to kindle your flame and a microbe puts it out.

More grievous than tears is the sight of them.

Man is air in the air and in order to become a point in the air he has to fall.

Would there be this eternal seeking if the found
existed?



Suffering does not follow us. It goes before us.

We tear life out of life to use it for looking at itself.

For as long as and insofar as it cannot be, it is almost always a reproach to everything that can.

This world understands nothing but words, and you have come into it with almost none.

He who remains with himself a great deal becomes debased.

We become aware of the void as we fill it.

God has given a great deal to man, but man would like something from man.

When everything is finished, the mornings are sad.

Following straight lines shortens distances, and also life.

Everyone thinks that his things are not like all the things in the world. And that is why everyone keeps them.

When there is no treasure to show, night is a treasure.

The tree is alone, the cloud is alone. Everything is alone when I am alone.

A hundred years die in a moment, just as a moment dies in a moment.

Suffering is above, not below. And everyone thinks that suffering is below. And everyone wants to rise.

My body separates me from every being and from every thing. Nothing but my body.

Sometimes at night I light a lamp so as not to see.

He who is imprisoned in evil does not escape from it for fear of encountering—evil.

If you are not going to change your route, why change your guide?

The less a creature thinks he is, the more he bears.
And if he thinks he is nothing, he bears all.

I saw a dead man. And I was little, little, little . . .
My God, what a great thing a dead man is!

Yes, one must suffer, even in vain, so as not to have lived in vain.

No one understands that you have given everything. You must give more.

The killer of souls does not kill a hundred souls. He kills one soul a hundred times.

He who does not know how to believe, should not know.

Only a few arrive at nothing, because the way is long.

I am in myself so little that what they do with me scarcely interests me.

Certainties are arrived at only on foot.

Man, when he realizes that he is an object of comedy, does not laugh.

In my silence only my voice is lacking.

Human suffering, while it is asleep, is shapeless.
If it is wakened it takes the form of the waker.

My truths do not last long in me. Not as long
as those that are not mine.

A child shows his toy, a man hides his.

Some things become so completely our own that
we forget them.

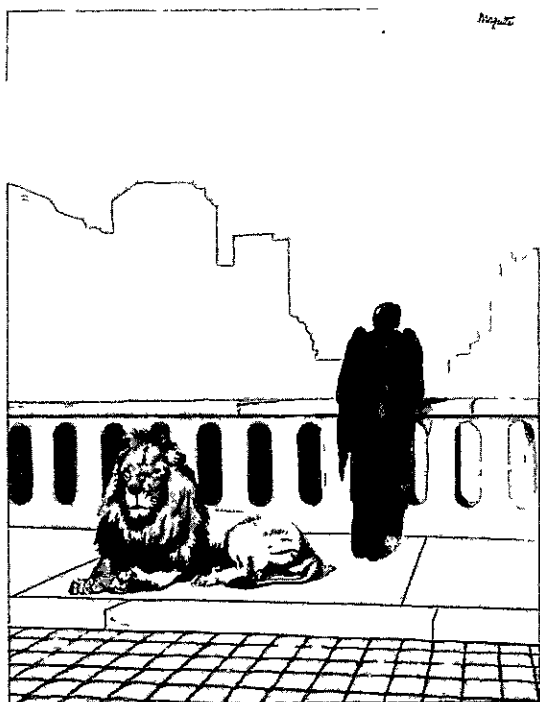
I love you as you are, but do not tell me how
that is.

If I did not believe that the sun looked at me
a little bit, I would not look at it.

The confession of one man humbles all.

Your pain is so great that probably it does not hurt you.

My faults will not pass into other hands through any fault of mine. I do not want another fault on my hands.



Yes, I will go. I would rather grieve over your absence than over you.

When you made me into another, I left you with me.

It is a long time now since I asked heaven for anything, and still my arms have not come down.

I know what I have given you. I do not know what you have recieved.

The shadows: some hide, others reveal.

The heart is an infinity of massive chains, chaining little handfuls of air.

Set out from any point. They are all alike. They all lead to a point of departure.

You are fastened to them and cannot understand how, because they are not fastened to you.

I look at myself and ask: "What do the others say is visible?"

I do not want anything over again. Not even a mother.

The loss of a thing affects us until we have lost it altogether.

Yes, this is what good is: to forgive evil. There is no other good.

You are sad because they abandon you and you have not fallen.

Whatever I take, I take too much or too little; I do not take the exact amount. The exact amount is no use to me.

The cold is a good counsellor, but it is cold.

I do not believe in exceptions. Because I believe that nothing comes from a single thing. Not even solitude.

The void terrifies you, and you open your eyes wider!

When one does not love the impossible, one does not love anything.

Everything is a little bit of darkness, even the light.

I am not like you. But if you are not like you either, then I am like you.

Some things, in order to show me their lack of existence, became mine.

Not using faults does not mean that one does not have them.

You have nothing and you want to give me a world. I owe you a world.

The blind man carries a star on his shoulders.

Man lives measuring and he is measured by nothing. Not even by himself.

My dignity asks him who does me no harm to do me no harm. Of him who harms me it asks nothing.

All that I have lost I find at every step and remember that I have lost it.

My particles of time play with eternity.

My final belief is suffering. And I begin to believe
that I do not suffer.

And if man were good, his goodness would be the
same as nothing. For it would cost him nothing.

I am chained to the earth to pay for the freedom
of my eyes.

To wound the heart is to create it.

The fear of separation is all that unites.

When I look for my existence I do not look for it in myself.

If those who owe us nothing gave us nothing, how poor we would be.

When you seem to be listening to my words, they seem to be your words, with me listening.

In its last moment the whole of my life will last only a moment.

When I have nothing left, I will ask for no more.

It is easier for me to see everything as one thing than to see one thing as one thing.

Every time I wake I understand how easy it is to be nothing.

I would go to heaven, but I would take my hell;
I would not go alone.

He who goes up step by step always finds himself
level with a step.

Everything that changes, where it changes, leaves
behind it an abyss.

You are a puppet, but in the hands of the infinite,
which may be your own.

Everything is becoming the same. And that is
how everything ends: becoming the same.

Among the superficial, if you are not one of
them, one of them has to lead you by the hand.

Man is weak and when he makes strength his profession he is weaker.

Real things exist while we attribute to them virtues of defects of unreal things.

The tragedy of man is greater when he gives it up.

Where everyone grieves no one hears the crying.

The sun illumines the night, it does not turn it into light.

When I throw away what I don't want, it will
fall within reach.

Every toy has the right to break.

Everything that I bear within me bound, is to
be found somewhere else free.

They are like me, I tell myself. And in that way
I defend myself against them. And in that way I defend
myself against myself.

The things of mine that are utterly lost are the
ones that, when I lost them, were not found by someone
else.

I have been my own disciple and my own master.
And I have been a good disciple but a bad master.

No-one can help going beyond. And beyond there
is an abyss.



My dead go on suffering in me the pain of living.

I stop wanting what I am looking for, looking for it.

I also had a summer and burned myself in its name.

They owe you life and a box of matches, and they want to pay you a box of matches, because they don't want to owe you a box of matches.

When I believe in nothing I do not want to meet you when you believe in nothing.

Sometimes I believe that evil is everything, and that good is only a beautiful desire for evil.

Since I prepare only for what ought to happen to me, I am never ready for what does happen. Never.

The taste of "mine" is not bitter, but it nourishes no one.

And if you still find something, you have not lost everything. You still have to lose something.

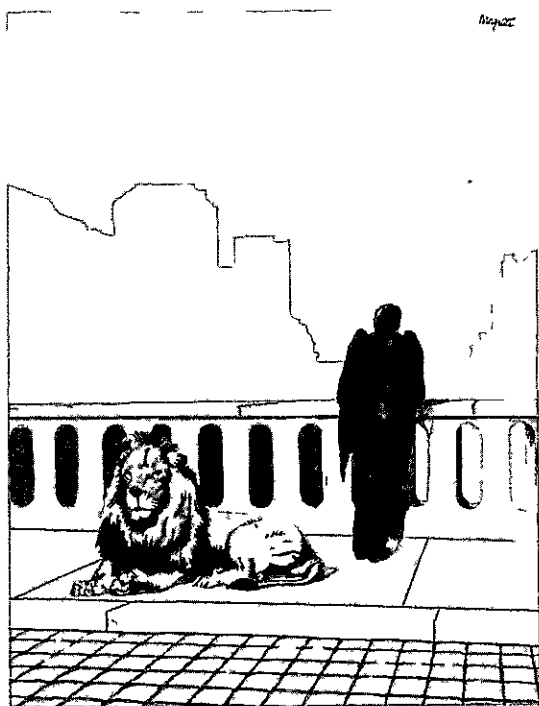
The children whom nobody leads by the hand are the children who know they are children.

If you could escape from your sufferings, and did so, where would you go outside them?

The love that is not all pain is not all love.

One learns not to need by needing.

If I were someone who led himself I would not
take the path that leads to death.



I hold up what I know with what I do not know.

And if the clouds think they fly with their wings,
they fly with their wings, but they cannot control them.

The condemnation of an error is another error.

Words that they said to me at other times, I
hear now.

As long as we think that we are worth something,
we wrong ourselves.

My name, far more than it names me, reminds
me of my name.

When I break any of the chains that bind me I
feel that I make myself smaller.

And why should I regret what I have done when
I cannot help doing what I do, which is what I have
done?

I keep my hands empty for the sake of what I
have had in them.

Now humanity does not know where to go,
because no one is waiting for it: not even God.

I have abandoned the beggarly necessity of living.
I live without it.

He who does not find a fountain through which
to pour his tears, does not weep.

My "I" has gone farther and farther away from
me. Today it is my farthest "you."

You are always telling a dream. When do you
dream it?

Now you do not know what to do, not even when
you go back to being a child. And it is sad to see a child
who does not know what to do.

He who has made a thousand things and he who has made none, both feel the same desire: to make something.

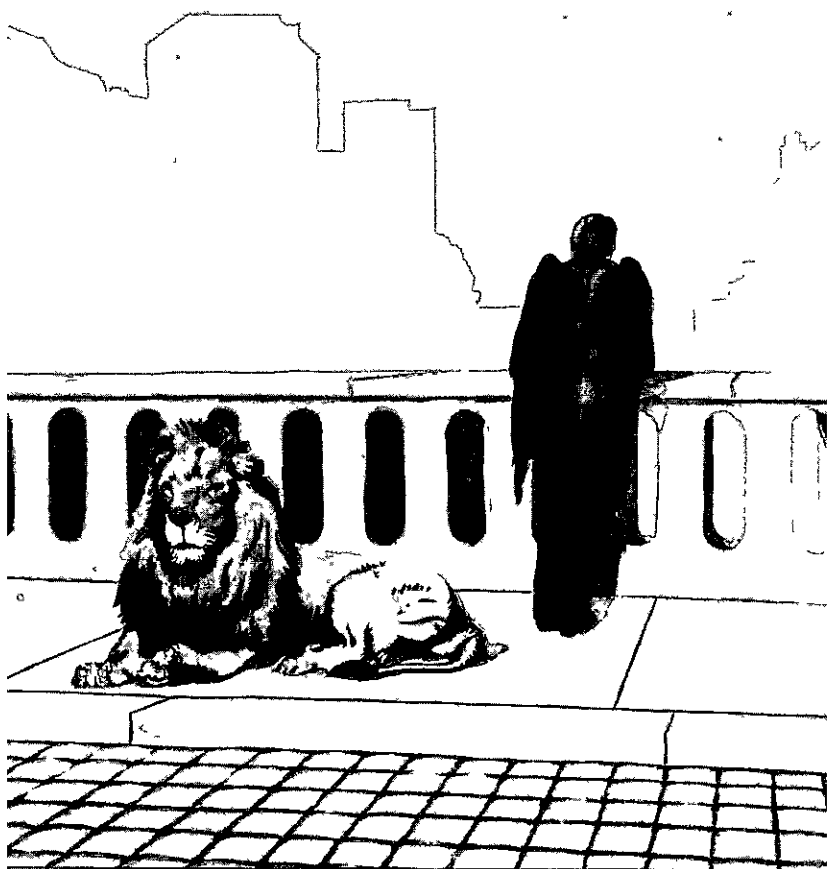
When I approach a soul I do not take with me a desire to become acquainted with it; when I go away from one, I do.

When I do not walk in the clouds I walk as though I were lost.

The virtues of a thing do not come from it: they go to it.

The harm that I have not done, what harm it has done!

Everywhere my side is the left. I was born on that side.



When they call me "my," I am no one.

Even the smallest of creatures carries a sun in its eyes.

If you are good to this one and that one, this one and that one will say that you are good. If you are good to everyone, no one will say that you are good.

He who makes a paradise of his bread and makes a hell of his hunger.

There was no delusion, this time. And this time I was afraid of everything.

The irreparable is the act of no one: it happens by itself.

I would ask something more of this world, if it had something more.

It is less degrading to fear than to be feared.

Those who gave away their wings are sad not to see them fly.

You do not see the river of tears because it lacks one tear of your own.

My neighbor's poverty makes me feel poor; my own does not.

We see by means of something which illumines us, which we do not see.

Do not speak harshly of your misfortunes to anyone, because everyone is partly to blame.

If flowers appear out of season, do not let them grow.

You can owe nothing, if you give back its light to the sun.

My great day came and went, I do not know how.
Because it did not pass through dawn when it came, nor
through dusk when it went.

That which was before me and that which comes
after me have almost come together, they have almost
become one thing, they have almost been left without me.

I began my comedy as its only actor, and I come
to the end of it as its only spectator.

In the eternal dream, eternity is the same as an
instant. Maybe I will come back in an instant.

In that world I knew that good was killing me,
but I thought it was evil.

And if you find everything as soon as you look for
it, you find it in vain, you look for it in vain.

The dream which is not fed with dream dis-
appears.

Everything is nothing, but afterwards. After hav-
ing suffered everything.

Almost always it is the fear of being ourselves
that brings us to the mirror.

Because they know the name of what I am looking for, they think they know what I am looking for!

When you and the truth speak to me I do not listen to the truth. I listen to you.

I can wait for you no longer. Because you have arrived.

The chains that bind us most closely are the ones we have broken.

To be someone is to be someone alone. To be someone is solitude.

What words say does not last. The words last. Because words are always the same, and what they say is never the same.

You wound and you will wound again. Because you wound and then you go away. You do not stay with the wound.

To the best of refuges I prefer their doorways.

The real "it is well" is something I say from the ground, having fallen.

The important and the unimportant are the same only at the start.

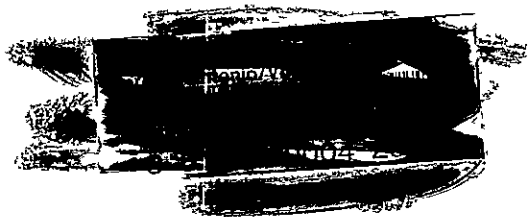
All truth acts out from the new-born. From that which was not.

He is small who hides in order to show himself.

It was always easier for me to love than to praise.

All things pronounce names.





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